

Enigmatic Aspects of Indian Punch Marked Coins

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It is a known fact that the coins contribute as one of the important sources imparting useful information for the reconstruction of history, especially of early India, where insufficient data is rendered by the literature as far as historical events are concerned. However, the most enigmatic aspect of archaic Indian coins is that these are devoid of essential records like the issuing authority, value, date, etc., and thus, have been baffling the historians for years and making way for manifold hypothesis. As unanimously accepted, the earliest coins of India are the 'punch-marked coins', which simply contain variegated symbols punched on their surface. Although the scholars accept these coins as the earliest fixed medium of exchange in the history of Indian economy, but they hold divergent opinions on their inception, hoariness, sequence, significance of symbols found on these, etc. Thus, the reconstruction of early Indian history on the basis of these coins, sans legends or inscriptions, has never been easy for the historians, mainly because of their perplexing traits.

Scholars have proposed variant theories on the inception of coins in India. Advocating for the Greek, Persian or Babylonian origin of Indian coins, a group of scholars believes that the Indian punch-marked coins were imitated from the foreign originals after the trade contacts were established with the West Asian countries around 7th-6th centuries BCE. The *Jātaka* stories, according to them, inform that the Indian merchants made frequent trips to West Asia for trading purposes, and thus, it is very likely that the silver spread-out plates¹ were imported to India from that part of the world for extracting coins out of them having uniform weight. The *shekels* of Babylonia, for example, were also punched like the Indian counterparts without legends; having irregular shapes, standard weight but no standard size and a small amount of copper added in both.² However, another group of scholars strongly rely on the indigenous origin of the archaic Indian punch-marked coins.³ Their notion is that the weight systems adopted for the Indian punch-marked coins entirely differed from those of the West Asian currencies. Moreover, the punched symbols on these coins were also dissimilar and quite different from each other both in character and nature. The Indian symbols followed the ideals and trends of their own land and bore no

trace of any sort of foreign influence. These arguments establish that the quandary of the inception of punch-marked coins in India is yet to be resolved.

The enigma expands when one tries to figure out the hoariness of these coins. The difficulty of ascertaining the exact time period of the circulation of punch-marked coins in the Indian society has been boggling the numismatists for decades. It is well understood that the barter system posed a number of obstacles during the exchange of commodities due to certain associated drawbacks, like the absence of standard measure, necessity of co-occurrence of requirements, indivisibility of certain goods and so on. Naturally, the society subsequently felt the need of a common mode of exchange and the metallic coins, thus, emerged to vanquish the complications of barter system. Some scholars opine that the Indus seals with pictographic script were actually used for monetary transactions,⁴ but no concrete evidence establishes this conviction with conformity. In spite of the fact that 7th-6th centuries BCE is generally accepted as the earliest period of circulation of the punch-marked coins in the Indian society, but the terms, like *niṣka*, *manā*, *suvarṇa*, *śatamāna*, *kṛṣṇala*, *pāda*, *hiranya-piṇḍa*, *kāṣāpaṇa*, etc., recorded in the Classical Indian Literature, still bewilder the scholars most often. The earliest text of the world, i.e. *Ṛgveda*, reveals the term *niṣka* with reference to sage Kāṣvat who declares that he obtained ten horses and ten *niṣkas* from the king Bhavya.⁵ Interestingly, another passage in the *Ṛgveda* depicts Rudra as wearing a *niṣka*,⁶ which unveils that it was a kind of ornament as well. The *Atharvaveda* registers the appreciation of a poet for the generosity of his royal patron who offered him three hundred horses, ten thousand cows, ten necklaces and one hundred *niṣkas*.⁷

Another term *hiranya-piṇḍa* (literally meaning ingot or lump of gold) mentioned in the *Ṛgveda* is also taken as currency by some scholars. It appears in the context of king Divodāsa gifting ten horses, ten garments and ten *hiranya-piṇḍas* to his priest.⁸ The *Ṛgveda* also records a term *manā*, which enticed some scholars to take it as a coin or currency. Indra, in this passage, is prayed to bestow cows, horses and *manās* of gold upon the devotee.⁹ The argument put forth is that it was adopted from the Babylonian *mīnā*, which was probably an ingot of silver or gold of definite weight. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* frequently mentions about *śatamāna*,¹⁰ which was offered to the priests as honorarium for their services. The term *suvarṇa*¹¹ also appears in similar context. In the same terminology, *pāda* is referred to in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, delineating King Janaka organizing a contest for scholars and announcing the most luring winning prize of ten thousand cows, each having ten *pādas* fastened to their horns.¹² In this context, another word *kṛṣṇala* is noted in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, where it is revealed that one *kṛṣṇala* was presented to each person participating in the chariot race held during the *Rājasūya-yajña*.¹³

Notably, all the terms mentioned above are regarded as various types of currencies by some or the other scholar, but the existence of none of these is established by the archaeological findings till date. A meticulous group of scholars holds that it is more or less risky to accept these terms as coins because all these varieties are cited in the literature as only the gifts of generous kings and not as the medium of customary transactions. These were actually not guaranteed by any recognized authority. As far as *manā* is concerned, the Babylonian *mīnā* was the name of a certain weight and not of a currency. The solitary Vedic reference simply shows that the Babylonian term was known to some Vedic people, but in general they were absolutely unaware of *manā* as some sort of definite weight or coin, which is evident from its disappearance from the later literary works.¹⁴

The enigma continues even in determining the chronological sequence of the Indian punch-marked coins as these are devoid of inscriptions, and therefore, the issuing authorities also reside in darkness. Following the literature, it appears that *kārṣāpaṇa* acquired firm footing in the society as the standard medium of exchange during the 5th-4th centuries BCE, as it is frequently mentioned in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇinī, the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya, the Buddhist canons, the *Jātaka* stories, the Jaina texts, etc. Needless to say, the scholars identified *kārṣāpaṇa* as the punch-marked coins, which are obtained in abundance from the length and breadth of the country. Another notable point is that this was the period when the relation of India with the West Asian countries strengthened making trade and commerce a booming affair of the time. This naturally necessitated the existence of an authorized and universally recognized medium of exchange in the market, and *kārṣāpaṇa* served the purpose. Different types of gold, silver and copper coins in circulation during the era and mentioned in the post-Vedic literature are - *śatamāna*, *śāṇa*, *kārṣāpaṇa*, *ardhapāṇa* or *bhāga*, *pāda*, *dvimāṣapāda*, *viṃśatika*, *trīṃśatika*, *kaḥāpaṇa*, *ardhakahāpaṇa*, *māṣaka*, *addhamāṣaka*, *kākiṇī*, etc.¹⁵

For the ease of study and understanding, P.L. Gupta¹⁶ classified the available punch-marked coins into two broad categories and called them Imperial and Local. The former, bearing five symbols only on one side, are recovered in a large number from all over the country, which conveys that these were probably issued by an authority having wide political influence all over the land. The latter, on the other hand, reveal one to four symbols punched on only one side and are obtained comparatively in lesser number. The coins of this group were in circulation within a limited area as these are retrieved only from the vicinity of the concerned region. Hence, being confined only to a particular locality, and thus, being local in their nature, it is assumed that these coins were probably issued by the local governing body of the associated region.

A significant aspect of the above classification of punch-marked coins is that most

of the hoards of the Local series are devoid of the coins of the Imperial series and *vice-versa*.¹⁷ According to Durga Prasad,¹⁸ the coins of the local series preceded the imperial ones. He referred to the political and geographical history of the pre-Buddhist periods to ascribe various types of local series coins to different *janapadas*¹⁹ and post-Buddhist period to ascribe the imperial coins to the powerful Magadha Empire. The *janapadas*, which were essentially tribal in origin according to Lallanji Gopal,²⁰ were gradually overcome and merged into Magadha towards the end of the 5th or the beginning of the 4th century BCE.²¹ For this reason, some scholars prefer to call the two types as Tribal coins and Magadha coins. It may, thus, be postulated that the various *janapadas* originated much earlier and continued to issue their coinage till they were included in the Magadhan Empire. Some scholars ascribe the date of the beginning of punch-marked coins of tribal series as early as 7th, if not 8th century BCE,²² while others mark it around 6th century BCE²³ on the basis of archaeological findings. The coins of local or tribal series were in circulation together with the imperial or Magadha series during the early stages of establishment of the Empire.

Evaluating the above views, it can be surmised that even if these are accepted in entirety, the enigma of the identification of issuing authorities still remains unresolved. Unless the issuing authorities are identified, ascribing chronological sequence to the early Indian coins, especially the tribal ones, will remain enigmatic. While some numismatists hold that the ruling authorities of the *janapadas* were responsible for issuing the coins, the others regard guilds as the issuing authorities because it was their trade, which necessitated the requirement of coins.²⁴ The availability of more than five hundred variegated symbols punched on these coins is not of much help, because their correct identification in itself is a baffling issue. Although some numismatists made efforts to reach at certain conclusions through arguments, but others preferred to leave them alone without any interpretation²⁵ to avoid further confusion. S.S. Ray is of the view that the interpretation of symbols is a matter of mere guesswork,²⁶ like judging the symbols as religious, auspicious, decorative, official marks, etc. could be misleading also, further increasing the ambiguity.

The Indian punch-marked coins, as pointed out, do not contain any internal evidence to settle their dates. Modern technology also stands helpless in this regard because the technique or instrument for dating metals is yet to be invented. Therefore, the explications of inception, hoariness, chronology, interpretation of symbols, etc. of these coins, devoid of inscriptions, rely largely upon conjectures and arguments of the scholars, which are primarily based on personal understandings, thus, always subjected to possible errors. Endeavours have been made to procure help even from the sculptural renderings to assign the nearest possible dates to these coins. Accordingly, the representation of almost square-shaped coins in the *Jetavana* scene of a Bharhut sculpture (c. mid-2nd century BCE) and on

the Mahābodhi *Stūpa* of Bodhgaya (c. 100 BCE) have allured the numismatists to accept these as the punch-marked coins, which were current if not during the time of Buddha, at least in the Śunga period. A sculpture from Amaravati also seems to depict coins that are likely to be the punch-marked coins.²⁷ But all these thoughts are just presumptions, lacking a solid base. Likewise, analyzing the weights and measures of these coins can furnish some help in arranging the comparative chronological sequence within a group, but cannot be applied to recognize the precise dates.²⁸

As a matter of fact, out of the techniques available to us at present, a careful comparative study during the archaeological excavation itself appears to be the best method, which could be relied upon for ascribing the nearest possible dates to these coins. Emphasis has been laid on stratigraphic digging during most of the excavations carried out in the Indian sub-continent. This procedure has certainly helped in placing the punch-marked coins recovered from such excavations to distinct chronological settings depending on the evidence of the dates of the strata containing the coins.²⁹ The existence of other datable objects in the same strata is sought for this purpose; and these and the strata itself are dated prior to assigning any date to the coins. It does not mean that the enigma is over. It is never safe to arrive at a conclusion on the basis of a single date; but only when a number of dates support and crosscheck each other that an approximate period of circulation of these coins can be determined.³⁰

Enigma is associated with the South Indian punch-marked coins as well. The identification and classification of these coins are still open for debate among the numismatists as no substantial evidence is available either from the literary sources of the contemporary period or from archaeology.³¹ Nevertheless, the availability of punch-marked coins in the hoards along with the inscribed Roman coins of the middle of the 1st century CE from Pennar (Coimbatore), Mambalam (Chennai), etc. prove that the circulation of the punch-marked coins was current at least in the adjoining areas in the period. The first excavated site in South India was Chandravalli (Mysore), which yielded punch-marked coins along with the coins of Sātavāhana period. But it is cryptic to fix the period of their circulation in that part of the country. Although efforts have been made to compare the symbols of the South Indian coins with those of the North Indian ones for ascertaining chronology, but the enigma here is that the symbols may differ in their inception as well as perception in different regions, because these symbols may convey not only religious significance, but also supply some astronomical or other information of non-religious interest.³² Curiously enough, some of these may even be traced back to the Indus Valley and Vedic cultures, like the arched-hill, hollow-cross, so-called Ujjain symbol,³³ four great animals, i.e. bull, elephant, lion and horse,³⁴ etc. In this situation, ascribing a definite meaning to a symbol

of a particular region is always under suspicion. According to T.V. Mahalingam,³⁵ some help could be derived from comparison of these symbols with those graffiti marks found on the potsherds of the same area. Black-and-Red Ware, Black Polished Ware, Russet-Coated Painted Ware and the Red Slipped Ware are the types of potteries procured from South India. These are placed in the time-span from 400 BCE to 400 CE. A good number of graffiti marks found on these are much the same as punch-marked symbols. On this ground, these coins can be skeptically put within this epoch, but determining their exact time of circulation is virtually next to impossible at the present state of our knowledge.

References :

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